

Gathering Proposal

by Vic

So after years of hemming and hawing about wanting to go to an Earth First! Round River Rendezvous I finally did. I went to a few workshops and meetings and left most of them early in favor of walking around an incredible hillside and meadow that one friend described as "something out of Mother Goose," or talking to friends from faraway places, folks I hadn't seen in at least three weeks. And it felt familiar. Not the fireflies or the sunsets, mist and rainstorms, but the feeling of justification.

In May the fine folks at the Trumbullplex in Detroit hosted a counter-institutions and networking conference. There were meetings and workshops. People told stories about their troubles in starting and running infoshops and community spaces. And at the end of the gathering what I liked was an all wom'n massage circle, exploring the big empty buildings in the city, playing spin the bottle (even though I was only kissed three times), soccer 'til ya drop, all night disco, and talking to people outside of the scheduled workshops and formal discussions. My experience is not unique.

I guess I wonder what we are trying to do, if anyone believes "it" is happening, and if "it" isn't happening why do we keep doing this???

You didn't think I was gonna ask a bunch of questions and then keep my big mouth shut did ya?!

Detroit first. I think we are workaholics. No. That's not right. I think we are talk-a-holics who act as if talking is working. We talk about what is wrong with our collectives and working groups, the limited impact of our projects, the same fucked up power dynamics that plague every group I've ever been part of. Work,

real work, takes time- more time than a three day weekend allows.

So. I think: a) we talk about these gatherings being important and about work but, b) they are mostly about talking about how even our smallest projects, let alone big (infoshop) projects, just don't work and, c) we have interesting discussions and lots of fun OUTSIDE of the gathering structure. So what? Are we using highfalutin' talk about work and plans to justify the legitimate need to hang out with people from other cities/places who are doing some of the same things and who share some of the same politics? And wouldn't it be more fun and less frustrating to just do that- hang out, relax, shoot the shit, play, scam, learn (informally) about the place we are visiting,?

The Earth First!ers have the same thing going only backwards. There is an activist conference in the winter, and the rendezvous in the spring. One for work and one for play. In theory. But even the time set aside as "downtime" (I'm not really comfortable with that word since it seems to invalidate the importance of relaxation and play in a relatively safe and supportive environment) is loaded with serious talk, pimping action campaigns, and lectures— many on subjects I'm always interested in learning more about— with play time reserved for nightfall, fire circles, and alcoholic revelry

Can people- activists, anarchists, whatever gather just to play, recover, be supported, hang out, relax??? Why the hell not?

Okay. Maybe more important, maybe only just as important: can activists, anarchist, whatever get together and actually do real honest-to-goodness work?

Organizing collectives and building/creating community centers doesn't start with brainstorming- it begins with encountering people, deciding who to work with,



and beginning the formation of a working group. How do you do that in real life, at home? How do new people become involved when entering a pre-established situation feels like agreeing to accept a set of unspoken guidelines and conditions? How do you turn groups of strangers or e-mail pals into a network that works? How do you leave a gathering with more than just the latest slogan on a t-shirt?

Of course I've got some opinions—they're coming right up!

My opinion goes something like this: If we really want to work: come away from a gathering with tangibles, recommendations, game plans (and a really cool t-shirt) we need to spend time together. A big ol chunk of the stuff. One week? Two? Three weeks even. Twice a year? More often?

And we need to be in situations that offer support, free flow of ideas, that "click." So, right away, first thing lets form working groups—collectives if you will. I don't know how, but small groups of no more than eight people who think that they can work well together and are willing to give it a try. Maybe organize a group of Midwest-ers, a group of computer nerds, an all wom'n group or two, a group formed of people from all over the country (and Canada too). Whatever. Random groups of people who just happen to like each other or think that they might.

Next thing: In a huge group (the whole gathering) decide the subjects that need opinions to be collected and shared, problems that need speculation or solution, issues that need to be incorporated into projects, projects that need to be designed, projects that need to be carried out, outlines for discussions that need to be created and shared, papers and articles written, information distributed, everything—big, small, significant, trivial. Make a big ol list.

Each working group is like an autonomous affinity gang. They pick out the one or two or nine or all of the things they want to do: an annotated bibliography for a bare-minimum radical library; an article on environmental racism; complete the research and formulate the campaign strategy for attacking the anti-poor measures being adopted in California; detailing how a squat time share can happen; planning summer camping trips and winter cabinning trips for a region; designing a spiffy voice mail bulletin board dealy for activists. Whatever.

Then start doing it.

Every night, during dinner (each meal is planned and prepared by a different affinity gang) the working groups get all mixed so people can share ideas with other groups, get feedback on what has been happening.

And then back with your gang—to work, take a break, talk, whatever. But spending 4-7-12- however many hours y'all want working on whatever got you excited in the first place.

Couple of days before the gathering ends make copies of what was planned, prepared, written, and discussed. Make a big ol 'ziney thingy of it all. Give everyone a couple of copies. Talk about it. Use it. Go home and share it. Talk some more. Experiment with it. Act on it.

A shorty-quickie gathering could be really productive if everyone focused on one topic. But I don't know if we can agree on a single topic that everyone will cross the country to work on.

Whatcha think? It's never gonna happen....

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